

# Handbook on National and Community Service

## The Michigan Project

Volunteering and engaging in community service—for volunteers with and without disabilities—are effective avenues for personal and professional development. Service participants actively contribute to the strengthening of their communities, while at the same time gaining valuable skills, exploring career paths, and developing networks that can lead to meaningful employment. The the Michigan Community Service Commission (MCSC) are working in conjunction with the National Service to Employment Project (NextSTEP) to provide opportunities for personal and professional growth through a variety of national and community service experiences for people with development disabilities in Michigan. Here are several important facts about what constitutes service, how benefits are affected, who can serve, how to connect, and what happens after the service experience.

### What is service?

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS, [www.nationalservice.gov](http://www.nationalservice.gov)) promotes a variety of local, state, and national service-based programs that are designed to touch almost every part of American life. You may be surprised to see that you are already familiar with some of CNCS's programs.

- **AmeriCorps\*State/National** members serve in programs related to education, public safety, health, and the environment. Local programs design service activities for a team of members. Members serve full- or part-time for one year or during the summer. Sample activities include tutoring and mentoring youth, assisting crime victims, building homes, and restoring parks.
- **AmeriCorps\*VISTA** provides full-time members to nonprofits, religious organizations, community groups, and public agencies, in order to create and expand programs that help bring low-income people and communities out of poverty.
- **AmeriCorps\*NCCC** (National Civilian Community Corps) is a full-time, team-based, residential program for men and women ages 18–24. Members live on one of five campuses, located in Denver, Colorado; Sacramento, California; Perry Point, Maryland; Vicksburg, Mississippi; and Vinton, Iowa.
- **Senior Corps** engages volunteers age 55 years and older to help meet the needs and challenges of America's communities.
- **Learn and Serve America** grants are available to schools, higher education institutions, Native American tribes, community groups, and other organizations to help fund the planning and implementation of service-learning programs.

AmeriCorps service members who successfully complete a service term are eligible for the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award of up to \$5,350\*, which can be used for future educational goals or to pay off previous student loans (members who complete a VISTA term of service may opt to receive a cash award in lieu of the Education Award). Service participants are also eligible for healthcare, childcare, and receive a living allowance. For more information or details on these and other benefits associated with service, contact MCSC.

*\*Education award may change annually and is prorated to hours of service completed.*

Individuals in Michigan who have participated in a service experience and have developmental disabilities reported doing the following types of task:

- Grant writing
- Volunteer recruitment/management
- Training
- Program development
- Database development
- Networking
- Asset Development
- Event planning
- Graphic design
- Collection and dissemination of information

Most of these activities occurred in an office setting.

### **Who can serve?**

Shannon McCue – AmeriCorps\*VISTA Alumna 2005 to 2006

*Shannon was a VISTA member who served in the College of Public and Community Service community technology lab at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. She helped users, including students with and without disabilities from low-income communities, to learn computer skills, other multimedia applications, and assistive technologies. Through her VISTA experience, Shannon, who has Muscular Dystrophy, gained an awareness of accessibility issues in community technology centers. She followed her VISTA service with a yearlong fellowship at a University Center of Excellence on Developmental Disabilities. There she conducted research on accessibility in technology centers in low-income housing projects. Currently Shannon works as a Peer Guide and as the Information and Database Manager at an Independent Living Center. She credits her VISTA experience with providing a background that developed her interest in creating access to technology for people with disabilities. She explains, "My VISTA experience gave me the knowledge and experience to advocate for people with disabilities and promote access to technology."*

No matter the age, background, education, interests, experiences, or abilities, CNCS has a program suited to almost anyone. Service is an excellent opportunity to gain skills and give back to the community for those who are transitioning from school to work, between secondary and post-secondary education, looking for positive resume building activities, or returning to work after an absence and desiring to learn new skills or old skills in a new way. For people with disabilities, national service provides a wide array of opportunities to build occupational and personal skills in their areas of interest.

### **Key Factors to Consider**

Service provides an excellent opportunity to excel and succeed in a work environment. However, several key factors should be considered when determining who is the right fit for service.

Service programs can be ideal for individuals who are interested in developing skill sets to succeed in a

job but may not yet have the experience or confidence needed to become employed.

1. Service experiences can garner self-esteem, drive self-advocacy, and build self-awareness for members who are ready to take these next steps in personal development.
2. Service terms are limited to a maximum of three years and members should be prepared to transition into employment or post-secondary education after that time.
3. The requirements and expectations of a service position can vary depending on the program and the type of activities. Individuals will be more successful if they fully understand the placement and make an informed decision about the match. Spending some time in a potential service site might be valuable in making that decision.

AmeriCorps members must be at least **17 years of age**, must be a **U.S. citizen, national, or legal permanent resident alien**, and must have a **high school diploma** (or be willing to work toward one) **or its equivalent** (i.e., Certificate of Completion). Once a member is selected, he or she will need to provide a birth certificate or other information documenting age and citizenship. AmeriCorps members serving vulnerable populations, such as youth or seniors, must be able to pass local, state, and national background and sex offender registry checks. Some programs have additional requirements for age and/or education.

Some other criteria may apply depending on the program:

**What is the time commitment?**

- AmeriCorps\*State/National: Time commitments vary, depending on the program. Most assignments are full-time for one year (1700 hours), but there are also opportunities for half-time (900 hours), reduced half-time (675 hours), quarter-time (450 hours), or minimum-time (300 hours) positions.
- AmeriCorps\*VISTA: All Vista positions are full-time (1700 hours), year-long engagements. The VISTA summer program is the only exception, with the engagement lasting between 8-12 weeks, but still being a full-time commitment.

**Are members allowed to have a job outside of their service?**

- AmeriCorps\*State/National: Members may hold another job, as long as it does not conflict with their program hours.
- AmeriCorps\*VISTA: Members may not hold any outside employment.

**Are members allowed to attend school during their service term?**

- AmeriCorps\*State/National: Member may attend school during their term of service, as long as it does not conflict with their program hours.

- AmeriCorps\*VISTA: Member may attend school during their term of service, as long as it does not conflict with their program hours.

#### **How many terms of service can members do?**

- AmeriCorps\*State/National: Members may serve two terms of service and then a third term in a different stream of service (VISTA or NCCC). Members may only receive the equivalent of two full-time Education Awards.
- AmeriCorps\*VISTA: Members may participate in up to three years. However, VISTA members can only receive two Educational Awards. *\*If a VISTA has received two Education Awards and serves a third year, the VISTA may elect to receive the cash stipend for the last year.*

#### Why is service important to me and my future?

*"The one thing about my experience as a VISTA is, although I had some part-time jobs, I never really had an office type of a job. Through VISTA, I was able to learn how to do things like marketing and planning that they don't necessarily teach you in school. And it was at a patient level; people weren't saying to me, "Oh, you should already know this..." I don't know that I expected that, but having never had experience, VISTA was a way to get hands-on experience without feeling the pressure of 'you're going to fail'."*

-Former Michigan Service Member

#### **Will my benefits be affected?**

Since individuals who participate in AmeriCorps programs receive a living allowance, one of the most important questions for a potential service member with a disability is, 'how will this affect my benefits?' AmeriCorps\*State/National affects benefits differently than AmeriCorps\*VISTA. Below is a general overview of how benefits are affected. For specific details contact the National Service Inclusion Project (NSIP) or the Michigan Training and Inclusion Coordinator.

The following benefits that may be affected by participation in national service:

	AmeriCorps*State/National	AmeriCorps*VISTA
SSI: Supplemental Security Income	No	No
SSDI: Social Security Disability Income	Yes	No
Food Stamps	No	No
Pell Grant	No	No
HUD Housing Programs	No	No
Veterans benefits	No	No
Medicaid	- For those receiving SSI—No - For those receiving SSDI—Yes, contact WIPA (Work Incentives	No

	Planning & Assistance): <a href="http://www.arcmi.org/new/wipa.contact.htm">www.arcmi.org/new/wipa.contact.htm</a>	
Medicare	Yes	No
Trial Work Period	Check with Benefits Counselor for questions regarding Trial Work Period; or contact WIPA (WIPA)	Check with Benefits Counselor for questions regarding Trial Work Period; or contact WIPA
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	Yes	No
Is the living stipend considered income if I am receiving SSI?	No	No
Is the living stipend considered income if I am receiving SSDI?	Yes	No

### **How can I connect with national service programs in my area?**

There are many ways to connect with national service opportunities. If you are a disability service provider and want to learn more about the range of options in Michigan and how individuals with disabilities can be included in service, contact Megan Sargent at the Michigan Community Service Commission.

#### **Megan Sargent, Training and Inclusion Coordinator**

517-241-3494

[sargentm1@michigan.gov](mailto:sargentm1@michigan.gov)

To learn more about specific service programs in your community and the types of service positions that might be available, it is best to contact Michigan service programs directly by searching the Michigan National Service directory at [www.michigan.gov/mcsc](http://www.michigan.gov/mcsc). Individuals may also search for national opportunities and begin the application process on the CNCS website at [www.nationalservice.gov](http://www.nationalservice.gov).

### **Ready to Serve?**

If you are working with an individual who is interested in national service, the first step might be to look at program options and see how they relate to individuals' interests and abilities. Most national service members must complete an online application before being accepted into a placement (selection is based on a competitive review of all applications). Some potential service members may need assistance with this process if they have difficulty navigating websites and completing forms. The majority of service programs select members based on an application and a formal interview process. This can be an excellent opportunity for those who need experience building their job interviewing skills. Once you contact a service program, they will be able to explain their application process and timelines. Some programs may have additional requirements so be sure to ask for their individual program qualifications for AmeriCorps members. The National Service Inclusion Project (NSIP) provides technical assistance for

programs, staff, organizations, and individuals interested in inclusion in service. For more information on NSIP visit: [www.serviceandinclusion.org](http://www.serviceandinclusion.org).

*"They selected me! I went to the interview, and it was the very first time I've ever had an interview."*

-Former Michigan Service Member

### **When do programs accept applications?**

Most service programs recruit new members in the spring and summer months. The exact start date can vary from January through December, but being aware of when service programs are recruiting new members is beneficial to placement. VISTA service members are required to attend a Pre-Service Orientation (PSO) before beginning a service term. PSO occurs every three to six months and can affect the service start date. Most programs are flexible and will accommodate early and late start dates.

### **What about accommodations?**

National service members receive accommodations in a variety of ways. Many accommodations are easily provided by the service program itself. Accommodations that cost or require expertise are handled by the MCSC Training and Inclusion Coordinator or addressed through a collaborative effort between the MCSC, the AmeriCorps program, and disability organizations. During the referral process, support coordinators may want to work with program staff to identify any potential accommodation or support needs and determine how those supports can be put in place. CNCS appropriates funds for accommodations and will meet any reasonable requests.

### **How do I find the right fit?**

National service provides a wide range of opportunities and can match the interests of the applicants to the most appropriate service experience for them. Specific details on available opportunities and locations can be found at [www.michigan.gov/mcsc](http://www.michigan.gov/mcsc) or [www.nationalservice.gov](http://www.nationalservice.gov) and the interactive program selector can provide assistance in selecting a program ([www.nationalservice.gov/for\\_individuals/ready/selecter.asp](http://www.nationalservice.gov/for_individuals/ready/selecter.asp)). For questions about a program's service experiences, potential members, their families, and disability service providers should contact service programs directly. Many programs are willing to work with potential or existing members, advocates, and disability service providers to carve out tasks and experiences that will benefit service members.

### **What happens after service?**

CNCS and many national service programs provide assistance with the transition to life after service. Service members receive information and training on personal and professional development and have opportunities to expand social and professional networks that may lead to positive post-service outcomes. AmeriCorps\*VISTA members receive one year of noncompetitive status for federal government jobs. Service members continue on to a variety of activities including: post-secondary

education, work opportunities discovered through networking while in service, remaining with the organization where they did their service, or employment in other sectors. While service experiences give individuals a variety of skills for their job search, they are not responsible for helping the individual find a job. Disability service providers can be very helpful for those individuals requiring supports or services in finding a job of their choice.

*"Everyone says you need experience or no one will hire you. One can get experience from volunteer service."*

-Former Michigan Service Member

### **Helpful terms to know:**

Program: AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve are all CNCS programs; “program” can also refer to a specific project that carries out the day-to-day service activities with service members.

Project: A CNCS grantee that provides services to a specific community or communities through the assistance of national service members.

Start date: The first day that a service member officially begins his or her service term.

PSO: Pre-Service Orientation; mandatory training for AmeriCorps\*VISTA members that must occur prior to the service start date; these trainings are three to four days in length and held regionally in cities around the U.S.; all travel (including transportation, food, and overnight accommodations) is covered by CNCS.

Service Term: The length of time a service member commits to participate in national service with a program; terms may vary from 3 to 12 months; some limitations exist for the number of service terms a member may complete.

Interactive Program Selector: An online questionnaire that helps determine which programs are best suited for a prospective member; this tool can be found at: [www.nationalservice.gov/for\\_individuals/ready/selectors.asp](http://www.nationalservice.gov/for_individuals/ready/selectors.asp); the MCSC has a similar search tool called the Michigan National Service Directory, which can be found at [www.michigan.gov/mcsc](http://www.michigan.gov/mcsc).

Eli Segal Education Award: Congress established the National Service Trust to provide an AmeriCorps Education Award for members who successfully complete service in AmeriCorps. Members can use the AmeriCorps Education Award to pay educational expenses at qualified institutions of higher education, for educational training, or to repay qualified student loans, and have up to seven years after their term of service has ended to claim the award.

Living Stipend: For all AmeriCorps programs, members receive a modest living allowance, and some programs provide housing. Most members find the living allowance to be adequate to cover their needs. AmeriCorps members who complete a term of service also receive an AmeriCorps Education Award.

End Date: The last day that a service member officially completes his or her service term.

CNCS: The Corporation for National and Community Service is a federal agency that engages more than five million Americans in service through Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America, and leads President Obama's national call to service initiative, United We Serve.

NSIP: The National Service Inclusion Project, a Corporation for National Community Service (CNCS) training and technical assistance provider meets training and technical assistance needs on the inclusion of individuals with disabilities as active participants in national service programs.

MCSC: The Michigan Community Service Commission strives to build a culture of service by providing vision and resources to strengthen communities through volunteerism. The MCSC uses Michigan's AmeriCorps, Learn and Serve-Michigan, Mentor Michigan, and the Governor's Service Awards to achieve just that.

For more information on service leading to employment contact:

**Megan Sargent**

*Training and Inclusion Coordinator*

Michigan Community Service Commission

1048 Pierpont Suite 4

Lansing, MI 48913

Phone: (517) 241-3494

sargentm1@michigan.gov

[www.michigan.gov/mcsc](http://www.michigan.gov/mcsc)

<http://miacleadercorps.blogspot.com/>

**Nancy Keel**

*Training Associate*

NextSTEP

100 Morrissey Boulevard

Boston, MA 02512

Phone: (617) 287-4374

[nancy.keel@umb.edu](mailto:nancy.keel@umb.edu)